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SUBJECT: Ambassador's Meeting with Chairman of Ethnic Minority  
Affairs Committee

#### Summary

1. (SBU) During a June 30 lunch meeting with the Ambassador, GVN Committee on Ethnic Minority Affairs Chairman K'sor Phuoc previewed his upcoming visit to the United States as an opportunity to learn about U.S. policy towards Native Americans and describe Vietnam's own ethnic minority policies. Phuoc noted the GVN's recognition that its efforts to improve the conditions facing ethnic minorities must continue another 50 years; stressed that incidents involving Protestant adherents are often a result of religious differences within families or villages; noted that his committee is working with the Committee on Religious Affairs to facilitate religious life for members of ethnic minority groups; and, outlined the GVN's efforts to improve the lot of ethnic minority groups, including an attempt to move to higher-value crops. End Summary.

#### United States, Vietnam Both Multi-Ethnic Societies

2. (SBU) The Ambassador hosted a lunch June 30 for K'sor Phuoc, the Chairman of the GVN's Ethnic Minority Affairs Committee, and the delegation he will lead to the United States July 9-19. (Note: Phuoc, himself an ethnic Jarai from Gia Lai Province, is the equivalent of a government minister and is a member of the cabinet. The delegation will have meetings in Washington and will travel to Arizona to visit the Navajo Nation. End Note.) Phuoc's mission is to learn about USG policy towards Native Americans and to explain Vietnam's own ethnic minority policies. The Ambassador welcomed the upcoming visit, noting that we have much to learn from each other. In the United States, we give our Native American tribes considerable autonomy, and they are able to take advantage of this to create economic opportunities, such as through casinos.

3. (SBU) In respect to our indigenous populations, the United States and Vietnam share some of the same challenges, the Ambassador continued. These include how to create economic and social well-being without destroying native culture and how to increase educational opportunities without causing young people to drift away from traditional ways and languages. The United States has been dealing with these issues since before our founding, and we have not always done a good job: there have been sad and tragic pages in our history. Today, the story is better and future prospects are bright, but there is still work to be done, the Ambassador said.

4. (SBU) Noting that this will be his first trip to the United States, Chairman Phuoc said that he and his delegation hope to learn how a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society like the United States has been able to manage itself and maintain stability and development. Also, as there are many USG officials and Members of

Congress who are interested in Vietnam's ethnic minority issues, he will use the chance to pursue a dialogue on this issue. The Ambassador agreed that it will be a useful opportunity to ensure that our policymakers and legislators have a chance to hear first-hand about Vietnam's experiences in this area. Many Viet Kieu in the United States are ethnic minorities, and their strongly held views have often shaped the opinions of their elected representatives. That said, the Viet Kieu community is not monolithic, and younger Vietnamese-Americans are increasingly returning to Vietnam for job and other opportunities, the Ambassador noted.

15. (SBU) Vietnam's own ethnic groups are widely diverse, the Ambassador observed. Ethnic Muong in Phu Tho Province are virtually indistinguishable from ethnic Kinh, but, in the Northwest Highlands, there is still a large economic and social gap between ethnic minorities and Kinh. It is good to see that in localities largely populated by ethnic minorities, they also occupy a significant share of local official positions. One useful tool for promoting the social and economic development of ethnic minority groups is through boarding schools that prepare them to succeed in life. However, these schools are expensive, and there are still not enough to respond to Vietnam's current needs, the Ambassador said.

16. (SBU) In response to the Ambassador's question about Phase Two of the GVN's Program 135, which is aimed at rural development and increasing opportunities for ethnic minority groups, Chairman Phuoc said that the next phase's four goals are: continuing infrastructure investment in disadvantaged localities; increasing the production capacity of farmers; providing training to local officials so that they can better manage Government programs; and, improving the social status of farmers. To help members of ethnic minority groups better integrate into society, the GVN believes that it must continue its efforts for the next 50 years, with a focus on: infrastructure investment; improving market mechanisms in ethnic

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minority areas; providing education; protection and development of indigenous cultures; environmental protection and forestation; training of local officials to ensure that they can make the transition from traditional methods of ruling to methods based on rule of law; and, stamping out social evils, such as drug abuse.

#### Religious Freedom

17. (SBU) The Ambassador expressed his agreement with the targets of the GVN's efforts and its long-term commitment, and offered one additional focus: finding a way to help ethnic minorities deal with their changing environment and new elements that are coming into their lives. This is a complicated matter. New roads are beneficial, but can also introduce alcohol and new types of narcotics. Education can expand young people's horizons, but it can also strain traditional ways of life and family structure. A market economy and a material lifestyle can also create strains on traditional culture, the Ambassador said.

18. (SBU) Another significant change involves religions that are new and not particularly well understood, the Ambassador continued. The Committee on Ethnic Minority Affairs can play a vital role in the GVN's efforts to positively manage the impact of all these matters. The United States and other donors are interested in the well-being of all Vietnamese, but have a particular interest in that of ethnic minorities. We are ready to be helpful in any way we can, and seek to learn as much as possible about the situation that ethnic minorities face. For example, we understand that reports of problems encountered by Protestants are often the result of cultural clashes at the family or village level and not because of local policy. Vietnam's national policy on religious freedom is clear, but what is needed is to ensure that this policy is uniformly implemented at all levels, the Ambassador stressed.

19. (SBU) The GVN recognizes that the issues of land and religion are of great interest to foreign observers and delegations, Phuoc said. Vietnam is making efforts to provide land to ethnic minorities for cultivation and settlement. At the same time, it is trying to

ensure that its policy on religion, as enshrined in the Constitution and the Ordinance on Religion and Belief, is followed. Each citizen has the right to believe or not to believe. As the Ambassador observed, problems often emerge because different family members adhere to different religions, or different generations within families have different beliefs. It is also true that local officials often do not have a correct understanding about religion. In response to the Ambassador's question, Chairman Phuoc said he works closely with Chairman Thi of the Committee on Religious Affairs on these issues.

¶10. (SBU) The Ambassador noted that lifting Vietnam's designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for religious freedom violations will require greater progress in the Northwest Highlands and northern Vietnam. Anything Chairman Phuoc and his committee can do to facilitate the GVN's efforts to ensure that Vietnam's laws are fully implemented and that new groups are allowed to register would be helpful. The delegation will meet with U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford on July 12. Ambassador Hanford is the key U.S. official dealing with matters related to religious freedom and CPC, and he will be interested in hearing Chairman Phuoc's views, the Ambassador said.

¶11. (SBU) The Ethnic Minority Affairs Committee is doing what it can to encourage Protestant followers to register themselves and their activities so that they can practice their religion in their own residences and communities and eventually build their own churches, Chairman Phuoc said. The committee is also working to send Protestant trainers from Hanoi, HCMC and Nha Trang to ethnic minority regions to ensure that they are learning correct beliefs. The committee's aim is for Protestants to practice their faith as a normal religion. The Ambassador praised the committee for its efforts in this regard, adding that religion can help ethnic minorities to have structure in their lives as their traditions are disrupted by modern life.

#### Economic Development

¶12. (SBU) The USG also recognizes that improving the economic conditions of ethnic minorities is a key goal, and to that end the U.S. Congress put forward funds to create projects in the Central Highlands, the Ambassador said. Cocoa production has seen some success in the Mekong Delta, and may be a good crop the Central Highlands. To date, we have worked with the MFA, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and PACCOM, and will also keep the

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committee informed about our efforts in this area.

¶13. (SBU) In response to the Ambassador's question about other economic development areas that should be further explored, Chairman Phuoc said that one area needing further effort is finding higher-value crops for sale in the world market. Furthermore, the GVN is trying to encourage entrepreneurs to set up processing plants in ethnic minority areas. Vocational training is also important as a means to better integrate ethnic minority youth. Finally, the GVN is looking at the possibility of labor exports. The Ambassador noted that, although labor export is a high-value area, there are dangers that some unsophisticated ethnic minority workers would be exploited. The GVN would need to ensure that their rights are guaranteed and protected. The Ambassador welcomed the Chairman's comments on high-value crops, noting that there is a need for farmers to look beyond subsistence crops. For example, while rice farming in upland areas is possible, it may be better to farm cash crops and bring rice in from elsewhere.

#### Visas-93

¶14. (SBU) The Ambassador thanked the Chairman for his and his committee's efforts to facilitate the USG's family reunification goals. Close to 60 percent of the total number of our Visas-93 applicants had departed for the United States, and our goal is reach 100 percent by year's end. In closing, Chairman Phuoc pledged to provide the Ambassador with a readout of his trip to the United

States.

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